Diversity of Early Childhood Education
Theories in a Democratic Society

Ulla Härkönen
University of Joensuu, Finland

Abstract
In a democratic society different views and conceptions on educational theories are seen as acceptable and useful. It is asked here what kind of theories we really have and what kind of theories we still could have. The research material is gathered from the general literature used in early childhood education during the last thirty years. The texts of the theories are analyzed using the content analysis method. Many of the theories are developmental, some are didactical, some are psychological, and very few are societal. There are also pedagogical theories. In this article the point is to cast light on the pedagogical theories and give the reasons for that. The analysis of early childhood education theories takes place in the context of a democratic society and sustainable development.

Key words: democratic society; diversity in education; early childhood education; preschool; Froebel’s theory; sustainable development.

Introduction
The decade from 2005 to 2014 has been declared as the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Sustainable development means ecological, social, cultural, and economic sustainability, all of which rest upon the knowledge, skills, and values that support them. All four ingredient areas are inter-dependant and can not be fully separated from each other.

Agenda 21 (Chapter 36) points out the importance of education and training for sustainable development. According to it the countries and educational institutions should integrate environmental and developmental issues into existing training curricula and promote the exchange of their methodologies and evaluations.

Education and pedagogical theories should have a connection to the goals of democratic, pluralistic, and sustainable development of a society. For instance, the critical pedagogy questions the structures of the school system and teacher education that promote social inequality and injustice (Kanpol, 1999: 27). The critical pedagogy is ruled by the ethical ideals such as justice, freedom, emancipation, democracy, non-violence, and pluralism. Pluralism in education calls for the diversity of different theories. The significance of theories can be understood after realizing that theories themselves participate in constructing the educational processes (Arendt, 2002: 308.) Peters and Burbules (2004: 90) hold that, for instance, Freire’s
ideas are significant for today as well, when it is important to focus on
social justice and participating democracy as well as on a critical approach
to pedagogy.

Early childhood education and preschool are laying foundations for
educational processes and the processes in a democratic society and sus-
tainable development. In training the teachers for small children, the theo-
ries of education have an immense impact on how the educators see the
phenomenon of education and its connections to the society, democracy,
pluralism, and the broader issues of sustainability (Häkkinen, 2004).

In this article the question is, what is the diversity of theories in the
area of early childhood education, have any theories been left aside, what
is the focus of theories applied, and how can the links between the theories,
society, and democracy be seen. The societal context here is the Finnish
democratic society.

Problems, Data, and Methods
In the scientific literature on early childhood education there are many
general theories with which the phenomenon of early childhood education
is closely related.

In this study the questions are the following:
1) What are the sources of influence on the Finnish early childhood edu-
cation?
2) Where is the focus in early childhood education?
3) What have been the most famous general theories in early childhood
education?
4) What kind of a picture do the books on early childhood education
represent about didactics, Bronfenbrenner’s theory, Vygotsky’s theory,
the constructivist theory, and Froebel’s theory?
5) What sciences do these theories belong to?
6) What are the main characteristics of these theories when they are
compared with the focus of the Finnish early childhood education?
7) What notions arise when these theories are compared to the Froebelian
theory?

The general literature on early childhood education over the last thirty
years forms the basis of research. While going through the texts, the re-
searcher identifies central categories, conceptions, and their meanings in
these theories and makes an interpretative and representative comparison.
Text samples are also presented (Häkkinen, 1996: 90-114; 1999: 149-165).
The main issue concerns the Finnish context of the theories on early child-
hood education.

Diversity of the Sources of Influence on Early Childhood
Education
The Finnish way of bringing children up has influenced and still influences
the institutional early childhood education. For example, the parents’ edu-
cational goals have been studied from time to time (Ojala, 1993: 159-174).
The opinions of the professionals about the problems of work and work
education at Finnish homes have been studied (Häkkinen, 1991; 1996;
The early childhood education and preschool in Finland have been outlined on the basis of school teaching. Uno Cygnaeus, the father of the Finnish primary school, also founded a kindergarten. He introduced pedagogical ideas from Europe to Finland. The present preschool and primary education curricula have in their form and content conceived as logical continuations. Certain didactical theories of school teaching have been applied in early childhood education and preschool (Esiopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2000, 2000).

The Finnish kindergarten pedagogical tradition is a hundred years long and it has been strong by its impact through the years until today. Even if the German Friedrich Froebel’s pedagogy (Froebel, 1951) holds a dominant position in pedagogical sphere, we also feel the influence of the teachings of John Dewey, Maria Montessori, Helen Parkhurst, Rudolf Teiner, Célestin Freinet, Paulo Freire, Vasily Suchomlinsky, Alexander Neill, Loris Malaguzzi, and a myriad of others. Coming from Sweden, we have felt the influence of the dialogue pedagogy, which has features from Paulo Freire’s pedagogy (Ojala, 2002).

The present day Finnish curricula carry a reference to the pedagogical teachings of Montessori and Steiner (Esiopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2000, 2000: 20), and Freinet’s and Malaguzzi’s Reggio Educational thoughts as the alternative pedagogies (Varhaiskasvatussuunnitelman perusteet, 2004: 41). But the most famous pedagogical theory is that of the German pedagogue, Friedrich Froebel. The Finnish kindergarten – nowadays ‘the day care center’ – is based on Froebel’s pedagogy. This is why Froebel’s pedagogical theory will be analyzed here.

The author has come to pedagogical systems thinking through her study of pedagogues, mentioned above (Härkönen, 1991; 2003a; 2003b; 2003c). The pedagogical theories of the mentioned philosopher-pedagogues give a reference to the systems and holistic way of thinking, where, for instance, every educational part of the theory is connected with the social category (Checkland, 1985: 245-285; Härkönen & Jämsä, 2006).

In Finland we have also studied the educational models in our neighboring nations and other countries in Europe and elsewhere.

The closest sciences to education are pedagogics, developmental psychology, psychology, philosophy, and sociology. Based on many sciences, the diversity of theoretical approaches can be found in the area of early education (Ojala, 1993).

Behaviorism has been used as a theory of learning, but it is subject to criticism. Didactics has been used as a theory of teaching. Bronfenbrenner’s theory, Piaget’s and Vygotsky’s theories are developmental theories (Vasta, 2002). Constructivism has been used as a theory of learning. We also know a societal critical theory, which points to in-equality in the society (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999). The diversity of the sources of influence on early childhood education is shown in the Figure 2.
The Focus of Early Childhood Education

The science which studies the phenomenon named ‘early childhood education’ is ‘the early childhood education science’. In Finland early childhood education means ‘care, education, and teaching’ for children from the birth to seven years of age. Preschool is understood as early childhood education for the six-year-olds. This means that preschool belongs to early childhood education or it can also be said that preschool is a part of early childhood education. Primary school starts at the age of seven. Preschool has many things in common with the first two grades at school. The newest national preschool curriculum was adopted in 2000, and the newest curriculum for early childhood education was published in 2004. It is based on the national lines of early childhood education from the year 2002 (Esioetksen opetussuunnitelmans perusteen, 2000, 2000; Varhaiskasvatuksen valtakunnalliset linjaukset, 2002; Varhaiskasvatussuunnitelmans perusteen, 2004).

In this article the concept ‘early childhood education’ always contains the concept ‘preschool’ even if it is not written. The main science is ‘early childhood education science’ and the main focus is ‘early childhood education’, more exactly ‘care, education, and teaching’.

Pedagogical Theories

Froebel’s views on early childhood education

Here the author takes one example of pedagogical theories, Friedrich Froebel’s theory. In the article “The new systems theory of early childhood education and preschool as a frame of reference for sustainable education” Härkönen (2003c) has studied educational thinking of the German pedagogue Friedrich Wilhelm August Froebel (1782-1852) and that of the Englishman Aleksander Neill (1883-1973). In that article Härkönen (p. 31) presented the figure of the general systems model of educational thinking. In the next chapter the author concentrates on Froebel’s educational thinking and creates a figure about it.

Froebel has been called ‘the father of the kindergarten’. Also the Finnish kindergarten pedagogy rests on Froebel’s ideas.

Below, the author brings Froebel’s pedagogical categories, referred to in her research (Härkönen, 1991) (Figure 1).

The central categories of Froebel’s theory are views on the world, human being, society, knowledge, education, goals, contents, and methods. Methods are opened here into views on basic activities and care, views on play (Spiel), work arts and crafts (Beschäftigung), views on teaching (Unterricht) arts and crafts, views on celebrations, and views on outdoor education.

The role of educator (Erzieher) and interaction with children are important and can be found in every category. The category of ‘arts and crafts’ can be included both in the category of work and in the category of teaching.
All the categories mentioned above had philosophy-based theories attached to them. For example, the Froebel’s bricks embody the important philosophical notion of the universe. Härkönen (1991; 2003b) has found the systems character of Froebel’s educational thinking.

In Froebel’s theory the ideal society is represented as democracy. Froebel’s theory is a pedagogical theory. The focus of it is the phenomenon of education and in it the concepts of care, education, and teaching are
found. The features of different sciences like developmental psychology, psychology, philosophy, and sociology can be found in Froebel’s pedagogical theory. Froebel has also given views on a whole pedagogical process (Barrow-Bernsdorff et al., 1977; von den Driesch & Esterhues, 1964; Froebel, 1951; Günther et al., 1973).

**Non-pedagogical Theories**

The author takes here four different and famous non-pedagogical theories: didactics, Bronfenbrenner’s theory, Vygotsky’s theory, and constructivism.

**Didactics and teaching**

Didactics (Brotherus, Hytönen & Krokfors, 2002: 103-116) is a discipline, the study of teaching. The development of didactics is closely connected to the history of development of school teaching. Didactics is a doctrine about teaching. Didactics contains the visions about the goals and contents of teaching and proposes the best means for reaching these goals. Didactics also offers guidelines for drawing up curricula. Practical didactics is always of normative nature.

Teaching is a comprehensive process, it is planning, action, and evaluation (Brotherus, Hytönen & Krokfors, 2002: 113-116). Teaching always implies the definition of goals, contents, methods, and values. Kansanen (1991: 251) holds that a teacher’s ‘pedagogical thinking’ is the principal problem of teacher education. The differences in thinking and in visions have an impact on teaching. Brotherus, Hytönen, and Krokfors (2002: 50-59) single out the child-centred, child-originating, and adult-originating pedagogical avenues of thought as examples of different ways of thinking.

Preschool in Finland has been widely influenced by school didactics. It is not a useful thing when school didactics widens its reach at the expense of a broader child pedagogics (Härkönen, 2002). It can then have an unsustainable effect from the point of view of child’s development. For instance, Froebel connected teaching with play, work, and other activities, Freinet saw working as a teaching method, Malaguzzi liked teaching to art, and Rudolf Steiner totally denied teaching before the age of seven. However, there are many features in didactics that are needed also in early childhood education theory (Figure 2).

**U. Bronfenbrenner’s Theory and Development**

In Finland in the sphere of early childhood education Bronfenbrenner’ theory of ecological development (1979) has been known for over 30 years. It has been applied in describing education, even if for Bronfenbrenner himself it is a theory of development. He has himself criticized his own theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). The Kurt Lewin’s theory that served as a starting point explained behaviour that Bronfenbrenner changed into development. The model does not namely decide what generates development, or education, says Bronfenbrenner himself (1989: 221).

Bronfenbrenner’s theory is a systems theory. Ballantine (1989: 14) has interpreted the systems theory not as a theory but as a model. Olsen (1978: 22) says that “a systems model is not a substantive theory of social organization. Rather, it is a highly general, content-free conceptual framework
within which any number of different substantive theories of social organization can be constructed”. Olsen (1978: 21) defines a system in a following way: “A system is a bounded and unified set of interrelated, dynamic, stable processes”.

Bronfenbrenner’s theory does not offer the tools for a comprehensive description of care, education, and teaching (Figure 2).

L. Vygotsky’s Theory and Development

According to Lehtinen and Kuusinen (2001: 121), Vygotsky’s theories are based on the dialectical philosophical tradition of the 19th century. Vygotsky’s main achievement is the theory of developmental psychology, a theory on development of psychological functions.

Vygotsky (1930/1978: 52-57) speaks of two types of social factors: cultural-historical and individuals with inter-influence between them. The widely known part of Vygotsky’s theory is the zone of proximal development (ZPD). This is the stage of the learning process, when an individual is unable to solve the problems alone, but needs the help of a more experienced person. Learning is a necessary and a universal aspect in the development of human psychological activities (Valsiner, 1987: 64-66; Vygotsky, 1981: 163).

Language has an important meaning in human development. Vygotsky wrote at the end of his book about thought and language that a meaningful word is the microcosm of human consciousness (Vygotsky, 1962). Valsiner (1987: 64) writes: “The central issue in Vygotsky’s theoretical thinking is the development of qualitatively novel (“higher”) psychological functions in the history of cultures and ontogeny of children in the process of organisms’ (i.e. culture or child) purposeful acting upon their environments”. Vygotsky tries to point out that the language has a most significant meaning for the development of human mental activities, direct social interaction, and independent solution finding. Vygotsky’s theory for describing development and language is called the socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978: 56-57; Vygotsky & Luria, 1994: 99-174). Davidova and Kokina (2002: 15) have underlined the systems nature of Vygotsky’s theory.

Vygotsky’s theory is the theory of development. It comprises views on the principles of learning and teaching, but it is not a pedagogical theory for systemizing the phenomena of education and teaching (Figure 2).

Constructivism and Learning

The constructivist theory is currently popular in Finland as the basis for understanding learning. In this theory knowledge is seen neither as an absolute nor as objective, the changing nature and subjectivity of knowledge, generated in the process of learning are emphasized. On some occasions it has been noted that human learning is such a multi-faceted phenomenon that for its perception a number of theories is needed, no one theory alone can provide all the answers. When moving towards a more mature understanding, the theories must not be listed in a strict order of preference (Puolimatka, 2002).

When speaking about a child, Bredekamp and Rosegrant (1992) sees that child constructs knowledge through learning and that earlier knowl-
edge structures channel the adoption of new knowledge. Individual differences have an impact on learning and development.

The curriculum is important document also for the constructivist teacher. Along the principles of the constructivist theory of learning the teacher can arrange constant changes in relation to the learners, the environment, and oneself (Prawat, 1990).

Constructivism is a theory on learning. Learning is a psychological process within the human mind. The term ‘learning’ has in some contexts been replaced by the term ‘teaching’ that has led to the evident confusion of these two phenomena. Teaching is an institution, created in the organised societies, it provides important individual and social development functions. Moreover, the relationship between learning/teaching and playing, working, taking care of oneself, celebrating and outdoor education, and the corresponding pedagogical categories should be understood. The nature of different children’s activities and the corresponding theories should be separated. The child’s learning is different in different activities. Learning gets constructed from different kinds of learning experiences (Härkönen, 1998) (Figure 2).

Discussion
In this study the first question asked was: What are the sources of influence on the Finnish early childhood education? These sources are home upbringing, school teaching, the models of other countries, and the diversity of sciences. As to other countries, it is not only the neighbouring countries and various European countries, but also the USA and others, too. The important sciences have been the educational science or pedagogics, developmental psychology, psychology, philosophy, and sociology (Figure 2).

The second question was: Where is the focus in early childhood education? Based on the Finnish documents it can be answered that the focus is on ‘early childhood education’, more exactly defined as ‘care, education, and teaching’. Through the prism of theories it can be seen that ‘development’ and ‘learning’ are like the goals of caring, educating, and teaching. Sometimes also ‘socialisation’ is seen as a goal. The main science is ‘the early childhood education science’.

The third question was: What have been the most famous general theories in early childhood education in Finland? The most famous theories can be divided into two categories based on science: a) theories based on the pedagogical science and b) theories based on other than the pedagogical science. The diversity of pedagogical theories includes the names and titles like Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Steiner, Montessori, Dewey, Parkhurst, Freinet, Freire, the dialogue pedagogy, Suchomlinsky, Neill, Malaguzzi, and others. The diversity of theories based on other than the pedagogical science covers the names and titles like behaviourism, didactics, Bronfenbrenner, Piaget, Vygotsky, constructivism, the critical theory, and others.

The fourth question was: What kind of a picture do the books on early childhood education give about didactics, Bronfenbrenner’s theory, Vygotsky’s theory, the constructivist theory, and Froebel’s theory? Froebel’s theory represents the pedagogical science, others are examples of the theo-
ries not belonging to the pedagogical science. A more precise picture about these theories is given in the corresponding paragraphs of this article. The picture is compact and clear, and the text quotations have been selected from the books written by researches.

**Diversity of the theories on early childhood education in a democratic society:**

| a) new pedagogical theory including diversity and pluralism; |
| b) diversity of many different theories separated from each other. |

**Constructivist theory** has been generally used as a theory of learning, but how to show care, education, teaching, and development?

**Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory** has been used as a developmental theory, but how is the process of care, education, teaching, and learning presented?

**Bronfenbrenner’s theory** has been used as a developmental theory, but where is the sphere of care, education, teaching, and learning?

**Didactics** has been used as a theory of teaching, but how to treat care, education, learning, and development?

**Diversity of the theories of other than the pedagogical science:**

- behaviorism, didactics,
- Bronfenbrenner’s theory, Piaget’s theory, Vygotsky’s theory, constructivism, critical theory, and others.

**Diversity of the sources of influence on Finnish early childhood education and preschool education:**

- home upbringing, school teaching,
- models of other countries, the diversity of sciences.

**Diversity of the theories of the pedagogical science:**

- Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Steiner, Montessori, Dewey, Parkhurst, Freinet, Freire, dialogue pedagogy, Suchomlinsky, Neill, Malaguzzi, and others.

**Froebel’s theory** is a pedagogical theory, the focus is on the educational process including care, education, teaching, learning, and development. Froebel has also the developmental theory as a part of his pedagogical theory.

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Figure 2. Diversity and pluralism of the early childhood education theories in a democratic society

The fifth question was: What sciences do these theories belong to? And the sixth question was: What are the main characteristics of these theories when they are compared with the focus of the Finnish early childhood education? Didactics is a part of the educational science. It has been used as a theory of teaching. When compared to the focus of early childhood education, it can be asked, how do didactics relate to care, education,
learning, and development? Bronfenbrenner’s theory is a developmental theory, but where is the sphere of care, education, teaching, and learning? Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory has been used as a developmental theory, but how is the process of care, education, teaching, and learning presented? The constructivist theory is a psychological theory and has been generally used as a theory of learning, but how to show care, education, teaching, and development? Froebel’s theory is an educational (or a pedagogical) theory, where the focus is on the educational process including care, education, teaching, learning, and development. Froebel has the developmental theory as a part of his pedagogical theory.

The seventh question was: What notions arise when these theories are compared to the Froebelian theory? As to the four analyzed theories or approaches (didactics, Bronfenbrenner’s theory, Vygotsky’s theory, and the constructivist theory) only didactics represents an educational science and it is the theory/theories for teaching. But didactics cannot function above all educational processes like, for instance, play, work, celebrations, and basic activities. Bronfenbrenner’s theory is not at all an educational theory. It cannot cover the whole educational process. Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory is wide and useful for many problems, but it cannot cover the whole educational or pedagogical process. The constructivist theory is very famous and valid in Finland today. This theory is focused on the learning process. But it has not penetrated the whole educational phenomenon.

Nowadays, in Finland, we have many theories that are didactical, oriented to developmental psychology, psychology or society. But educational or pedagogical theories like those of Froebel’s, Montessori’s, and Steiner’s have been pushed aside. It can be asked if this is the issue of the power of science? In a democratic society, however, the plenitude of theories and pluralism can be seen as useful. Diversity of the theories on early childhood education in a democratic society can be sustained or created by a new pedagogical theory, which includes diversity and pluralism, or by a diversity of many different theories separated from each other.

Still a more scientific issue is the question about the focus of early childhood education. It must be asked how we are getting answers to the problems of the whole pedagogical process.

Froebel’s theory comprises all the processes that form the focus of early childhood education: care, education, teaching, development, learning, and also socialisation. In Froebel’s theory it is possible to comprehend the whole educational or pedagogical process – as it has also been practiced in many countries during a very long time. However, modern theories will be needed when the societies are changing and when the features of diversity and pluralism are valuable principles. Froebel’s theory is a systems theory and it can be a good example in the future when a new theory or new approaches will be created. In Froebel’s theory the society is clearly one part of the whole system (Figure 1). In the systems model it is possible to realize the connections between all educational categories or parts and the society. When democratic values will be applied to every category of the pedagogical systems theory, it will be possible to move toward a sustainable way of development.
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Correspondence:
Ulla Härkönen PhD, University of Joensuu, Savonlinna Department of Teacher Education, Box 86, 57 101 Savonlinna, Finland. Email: Ulla.harkonen@joensuu.fi

Received 1 March 2006; revised version received 1 May 2006